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**by . . . William Morrison**

*Lending libraries have been known to make mistakes—but never one so potentially explosive as the time they sent Carrie the wrong volume.*

*Hypnotism, as anyone who has ever watched a snake charm a bird knows, is for older than homo sapiens. Yet only since the eighteenth century days of Dr. Mesmer has it emerged from priestly mambo-jumbo into the realm of science. Even today, despite its wide medical usage, hypnotism is not wholly accepted. But in a hundred years ...*

IT SEEMED INCREDIBLE, thought Carrie Samason, that a simple postcard like that could have involved her in so much trouble. If it had been something important, like her getting a new hairdo, or rearranging the living room, or buying a new evening gown, she might have expected all sorts of perfectly amazing results to follow. But from the postcard and the fact that she had sent James instead of going herself, she expected nothing at all.

It had come, she remembered, that morning when she was so busy getting Barbara ready to go back to college. All those clothes to try on, and hems to let out and shoes to fit, and right in the middle of everything, "Dear Madam," she was informed, "*The Perfect Hostess* by Wilhelmina Hoskins, which you reserved, is now being held for you. Please call for it within the next 48 hours."

At first Mrs. Samason was annoyed. She had reserved the book three months before and her feeling of need for it had long since died away. Nevertheless, it occurred to her, a book which was in such demand that you had to wait three months for it must be pretty good. It wouldn't hurt to take a look at it. She spoke to James about it, but he was only eleven and there was a baseball game in which he had to pitch and he didn't have any time, and honest, Mom—

"Either you get that book for me or you don't receive your allowance for next week," she said firmly.

James got the book for her. But on the way home he stopped off to play baseball and when he finally arrived, she recalled, she hadn't asked him about it.

The next morning she remembered it just as he was leaving for school. "I put it in the parlor, Mom," said James and departed.

But she couldn't find it in the parlor and there were so many things to do, like cleaning up the mess Barbara had left in her room and fixing the rips in James' pants—she wondered if any other eleven-year-old on earth could rip so much so often—that she forgot all about it for a while.

It was as if there had been no postcard, no book. At least that was the way it was for a time.

Two days later, when Bill came home from work, he dumped himself into an easy chair and said, "Saw a funny thing today."

"I had a letter at last from Barbara," said Carrie absently, patting her hair into place and wondering what her husband would think of her if now, at the age of forty, she dyed her hair red.

Bill always told her that as a brunette she was both young-looking and pretty. The question was, would he tell her the same thing if she were a redhead? Probably not. Men were foolishly conservative about such things.

"Barbara said school supplies are very expensive this year," she went on. "She wants more money."

"It was really funny." If she could ignore his conversation he could ignore hers right back. That was one of the unfortunate things, she realized, that marriage taught a man. "You know that vacant lot with the broken fence, where the kids play? Know who I saw playing baseball there today?"

"James, of course. But, Bill, Barbara said—"

"James was pitching. But you'll never guess who was catching."

Bill was being silly, just like the big baby he was. At his age, to think that a children's baseball game was important! But she didn't mind humoring him. She guessed, "That big puffy-faced boy from down the street, with the hair so blond it's almost invisible?"

"No." He leaned back, waiting for her to guess again.

"I'm sure I haven't any idea who it was," she said. "But does it matter? According to Barbara—"

"It was Reardon, the cop. You know, the one with the stomach."

"Reardon?" She stared at him. "Why, he's been chasing them off that lot every day. He *hates* kids. You must be mistaken."

"I'm not mistaken. He was catching there, acting like a kid himself, when who should come along out of a police car but Lieutenant Puffinger from the local precinct.

Well, you should have heard him when he saw what Reardon was doing. I'll bet those kids learned a few words they didn't know before. It seems that Reardon hadn't made his call from the street box and the cars were scouting around trying to find out what had become of him. And here he was playing baseball!"

"Imagine that!" said Carrie. But her heart was still elsewhere. She said, "Barbara says ..."

So they talked of how much money to send Barbara. And Carrie thought that nobody could tell *her* how to manage a husband. You pretended to listen to him and whatever he said you let go in one ear and out the other, while you kept your mind on the really important thing. But she was to remember Reardon later.

The next day there was a rumpus at the school. What happened there was even more incredible than the doings of Reardon. The local Superintendent was proud of his neatly operated educational system, and had set that date for showing around a group of distinguished visitors.

Neither the newspapers nor Carrie ever managed to get straight at exactly what point things had begun to go wrong. When they tried to trace the events of that day practically all the distinguished visitors, including two college presidents, the president of the Board of Education, a Professor of Educational Psychology and two heads of Normal Schools gave different and conflicting stories.

What did come out, however, was that all six visitors had distinguished themselves in a quite unexpected way. They had run around the school madly waving torches and yelling, "Down with school! Down with school! Burn the place down!"

The firemen had arrived in time to prevent much damage but the incendiaries had been rounded up only with great difficulty after school had been dismissed. The President of the Board of Education had beaten up the Superintendent and the two college presidents had ganged up on one of the hastily summoned policemen. Later on they could give no reason for why they had done so.

"It's a crazy world," thought Carrie wisely. "You never know what sort of lunatic you'll run into next." And then she put it out of her mind and turned to a more important problem. What could she have for dinner that night that would please Bill and not make him say, "You *know* I never eat spinach,"— or broccoli or her new sauce or whatever it was he was never eating that week?

All the same it didn't surprise her greatly when Bill came home the day after and said, "You'll never guess what happened at the office."

"Somebody else went crazy."

"Nobody went crazy. We all slept."

"What?"

"We all slept. At ten o'clock Mr. Elvergard came in and said, 'All right, boys and girls, we've been working too hard, all of us. Let's take a nice long rest today, shall we? Put your pretty little heads on your pretty little desks. One, two, three, snooze!'"

"You're joking!"

"Cross my heart and hope to die. We all fell asleep and we stayed asleep till four-thirty and then he woke us up and sent us home early so we wouldn't get caught in the worst of the subway rush."

Carrie looked at him and said absolutely nothing. What had happened at school had been bad enough. But this was absolutely incredible. There were times when Bill was a great kidder and she wasn't sure whether to take him seriously or not. This appeared to be one of the times when he was not to be taken seriously. Even if there were the faintest chance that he was telling the truth she thought it best not to encourage him by pretending to believe a story like *that*.

It was harder, however, to take things as a joke when something just as silly happened to her. In this case she could remember almost every word exactly, without having the slightest idea of what had caused the whole conversation to take so unexpected a turn.

The usual group was in for bridge. They had been playing for about half an hour—that skinny Mrs. Cayley munching away daintily at all the richest cakes as if she thought they might put some decent flesh on her, Mrs. Munro making a great fuss about the fact that the special candies she was eating were non-nutritive and therefore non-fattening, the others just eating normally and too much as the mood struck them. Mrs. Munro was dummy, and by some shrewdly ill-timed advice managed to make her partner go down three.

Her partner was furious but Mrs. Munro just giggled. "You'll never guess whom I saw with somebody else's wife," she said in her loud whisper.

"Really?" said Mrs. Cayley. "Janet's husband?"

"Not in a million years. It was *my* husband!"

Carrie sat up *as if* she had received an electric shock. This was a new sort of gossip.

"Well, at least your Bruce has good taste in women," said Mrs. Cayley generously. "Now, when *my* husband steps out—well, really, I'm ashamed of him. Of course, I suppose he does the best he can, poor dear."

That was the way it went the rest of that afternoon. When Carrie thought back to it later she shuddered. She had never before taken part in such a gossip session and she hoped that she never, would again. Each of them had chatted, not about some absent individual but about herself and her own relations. What skeletons had popped out of the closets!

It was the morning after that Barbara's letter came. "We had the funniest basketball game last night," wrote Barbara. "Our team was playing the girls from State College and right in the middle of the game, when it was so exciting and we were all yelling like mad, our captain, instead of shooting at the basket, suddenly stopped and said, 'This is no fun, girls. Let's aim for something big.'"

"And she turned right around and threw the ball as hard as she could at Professor Hazlehurst's head, the one who teaches chemistry. You know—I've told you about him. And then all the players began to throw the ball at people in the crowd.

"You can imagine the uproar! The referees were blowing their whistles and all the girls were yelling and rushing to get out and I was afraid some of them would get hurt. But at last President Newsom managed to quiet things down and they stopped the game.

"They've called in Professor Griggs, who teaches Psychology, but she admits that she hasn't the slightest idea why it happened. Some of the girls say it was gamblers and they bribed the players but that's *so* silly. Nobody ever bets on *our* games.

"It's just one of those mysteries that it looks as if they'll never solve."

Carrie read with amazement, going back again and again to make sure that she hadn't misinterpreted Barbara's straggly script. She hadn't. Toward the end of the letter Barbara added something that surprised her almost as much as the account of the basketball game.

"You'll never guess who wrote to me—*your dear son, James!* It's the first time in his life he ever had anything to say to his sister. It must have been quite a sacrifice for him to spare the three cents for the stamp. But seriously, Mother, I was *touched*. He's *really* a very good kid at heart. He didn't say much but from him the very idea of writing means a lot. I've misplaced the letter now but I'll let you see it later. It was so very amusing."

She would have to say something nice to James, thought Carrie. He was, she agreed with Barbara, a most thoughtful boy. He had changed of late. Not that he behaved very differently about hanging up his coat or leaving his shoes in the middle of the floor at night but there was something about him, she couldn't tell what, that made her feel he was a treasure among sons, a joy and a comfort.

She was aware of a feeling of pride in him that night when she and Bill left him staring at the television set. He had promised faithfully to go to bed at 9:30 and as she kissed him she said, "Don't forget to have a glass of milk and some jam and bread."

"And don't forget to go to bed at nine-thirty," growled Bill.

"He won't forget," said Carrie. "He promised. Goodnight, dear."

As he closed the door behind them Bill said, "Bet he stays up till ten at least."

"You don't appreciate him," replied Carrie. "He's an extraordinary boy."

"No different from any other kid—except that he's ours."

"He's very much different. I'm afraid you're not very perceptive about these things."

Bill growled again, something unintelligible this time, and the conversation died down. *The romance is out of our marriage*, thought Carrie. *A husband like Bill is never very polite. Except, of course, to other men's wives. He takes me for granted, just as he takes his children.*

*Bet he won't behave to the others tonight as casually as he behaves to me. I remember that time Mrs. Gallaher was over at the Munros'. You would have thought that woman was a poor delicate fragile little flower who had to be tenderly cared for. Whereas we all know she has the strength of a horse. Looks a little like one too. What any man can see in her ...*

"Why, hello, Mrs. Gamber," she said as they entered the Munro house. "I was hoping so much that we'd find you and your husband here again this evening. Clara said that you were afraid you wouldn't be able to get out. How is little Elsie?"

"Much better, thank you."

So much for formal politeness. Bill, of course, was all set to treat her with his usual tenderness when Clara Munro said, "They have the most wonderful program on tonight. Let's look at it for a while."

Carrie didn't mind at all. At least looking at the screen would keep Bill from worrying too much about Mrs. Gamber. Although, goodness knows, if they had meant to watch television they might just as well have stayed home with their own son.

But Clara was right about one thing. The program was wonderful—unexpectedly wonderful.

The master of ceremonies came out and announced the famous personalities he was going to display within the next few minutes, and then there were the usual commercials and after that the first dramatic sketch. It was a love scene between the current great lover and a very famous leading lady. It would have brought tears to the most callous viewer's eyes. Only ...

Only, the great lover suddenly became an exact duplicate of Bill, and the leading lady was Mrs. Gamber. Carrie rubbed her eyes but that was how they looked. Then she stared around at Bill and Mrs. Gamber then in the room with her, then at Clara Munro and the others. No one seemed to see anything strange.

She felt that she couldn't stand it. At the most tender moment her fists clenched and she found herself standing up. "Stop it!" she shouted.

The great lover, who looked like Bill, seemed to turn and look right at her. And then the telephone rang and he no longer looked like Bill at all. He wore a six-shooter and a ten-gallon hat and chaps and spurs. He answered the phone, and said, "Them diamond-backed owl-hoots are raiding the Bar-B spread, pardner, down in Red-Eye Gulch. Gotta act fast to stop them, pardner."

Carrie's eyes opened wide. The tone was caressing, full of tender passion. But the words . . .

The leading lady had changed too. She no longer looked like Mrs. Gamber. She replied happily, "If we spur our bosses, pardner, we can ambush them galoots at Bald-eagle Pass. Shake a leg, pardner, and we'll lam them rattlers a lesson they'll never furgit."

The scene blacked out. After a second or two a perspiring master of ceremonies appeared and stammered, "Ladies and gentlemen, due to technical difficulties beyond our control we—er—cannot bring you the rest of this touching love scene. However, I know you'll just love our next attraction, a juggling act by that famous foursome, the Juggling Jugheads."

Everything that the Juggling Jug-heads touched seemed to be under a curse. It dropped—dropped and shattered. Carrie had never been part of such an embarrassed audience. It was the most painful thing, outside of seeing Bill and Mrs. Gamber, that she had ever witnessed.

Next came a comedy act. This was even worse. A famed star of slick sophisticated comedy told jokes and made puns of which James would have been ashamed. Carrie hid her head in her hands.

She said suddenly, "This is just *too* awful. Clara, please turn it off."

Clara Munro was looking clued herself. She turned off the set and said, "What on earth happened to them? In that first scene the hero and heroine looked like you, Carrie, and Mr. Garnber."

"Like *me*?"

"Like *you*, Clara," said Mr. Munro.

Carrie said, "I think we must all be seeing things. Anyway, they're usually so *good*. And tonight they were terrible."

"There seems to be some sort of insanity abroad," said Bill. "And it almost looks as if it's catching."

That was it, she thought. It *was* catching. She wondered where it would strike next.

When they got home that night they found James peacefully asleep. The glass from which he had drunk his milk was in the kitchen sink, along with the knife he had used to spread his jam. He had been a very obedient boy, thought Carrie, and once more her heart warmed to him.

But he had his weaknesses. She realized that the next day when she was once more reminded of the book. It happened in the afternoon, after she had read another of Barbara's letters. Barbara was writing with a frequency little short of amazing. The basketball incident in the college was still the subject of discussion and she just *had* to tell her mother how exciting things were. But behind that, felt Carrie, there was something else. Barbara was developing a sense of responsibility. She was growing up at last.

Why, it was just a little while ago, she thought, that Barbara was a tiny infant. And now she'll be graduating from college and getting married—and . . .

It was thus the most natural thing in the world for her to begin planning the details of Barbara's wedding. Maybe it would be a morning wedding, she thought. How many people should they invite? What sort of food should they serve and what arrangements should they make about a reception?

It was these questions that reminded her of the book. *The Perfect Hostess* would have all the answers if anything would. But where was *The Perfect Hostess* hiding?

She began to make another search for it. But *The Perfect Hostess* seemed to be a canny book. It was nowhere she looked, not in the parlor nor in the hallway nor in the bookcases, which she explored in the vain hope that some spasm of neatness had struck her son.

"The little silly must have put it in his own room," she muttered finally. She climbed the stairs to look there.

It was not on any of the shelves with his games or his other books. But when she lifted his pillow, she saw it at last. She opened the cover, and her library card stared her in the face. Then the book opened to the middle, apparently of its own accord, and a dirty thumbprint looked up at her. Obviously, James had been reading *The Perfect Hostess*. What on earth had got into him to do it?

At that moment she heard the front door slam, and the next moment he was bouncing up the stairs. She turned around and faced him sternly. "James, what do you mean by hiding this book? You told me you put it in the parlor."

He said hoarsely, "Look, Mother," and made a sudden motion with his right hand. Carrie felt her eyes glazing when suddenly the front door bell rang. That roused her. She closed her eyes and shook her head. For a moment she had had the queerest feeling.

James said, "Mother —please, mother," and made the same motion again.

This time it was a bellowing voice that saved her. "*Vegetables!*" it called. The voice's owner had grown impatient of waiting and had opened the front door. "*Vegetable order!*"

James was about to make the motion a third time when Carrie acted. Whatever possessed her to do such a thing she didn't know. It was as if some hidden person had given her a command and she had misunderstood it. She slapped his face as hard as she could, and James fell back on the bed. She stood there, horrified at herself, when for a third time the voice called, "*Vegetables! Say, lady, I can't stand here waitin' all day!*"

She ran down the stairs and said breathlessly, "Put them down. I'll pay you tomorrow. I have no time now. Please come back tomorrow. No, wait. Stay here for just another minute, and yell 'Vegetables' again after I go back upstairs."

Then she ran upstairs again, leaving him scratching his head in bewilderment.

James was picking himself off the bed, looking more frightened than angry. He made a motion with

his hand once more, but uncertainly this time and Carrie did not let him finish it. She didn't even need the cry of, "*Vegetables!*" to save her. She leaped at him and held his hands down to his sides. Then she tried to tie him down with a pillow case. James was strong for his age and he struggled hard but she was more desperate than he and she won.

"Stay there," she ordered. Then she picked up the book again.

*The Perfect Hypnotist*," she read. "By William Haskins. 2083. U. S. Govt. Press."

Why—2083 was the date of publication, wasn't it? Impossible! The book had been handed out by mistake, of course, for *The Perfect Hostess*, but 2083—incredible. It wasn't due to be written and published for another hundred years. You just couldn't confuse a book with something so far from coming into existence.

In a trance, she turned the page. "Hypnotism is no subject for the uninitiated," she read. "It is a useful but at the same time a most dangerous weapon in the arsenal of psychological treatment. The enormous advances made in the past century, especially from 1978 on ..." The past century—the more than a century yet to come, she thought.

Impossible, she told herself again. This was *not* published in 2083. Or rather, it *wouldn't* be published until 2083. Why, the important discoveries wouldn't begin to be made until 1978. Then, what was it doing here?

"This book is therefore not meant for general circulation and should be kept out of the hands of all but qualified medical men . . ."

It should, should it? She looked at the last of chapters. *Hypnotism, General — Hypnotism, Direct — Hypnotism at One Remove—Hypnotism at Second Remove—Specifically Directed Hypnotic Acts—Generally Directed Hypnotic Conduct — Hypnotism as Therapy —Mass Hypnosis—Hypnotism via Electromagnetic Waves — Reverse Electromagnetic Effect ...*

The list was incredible. The book looked thin enough, but there were over a thousand pages in it. It was full of information. Too full.

She still didn't understand how it had got to the library shelves but at least one thing was clear. James must have started reading it that very first day when he had got it for her. He must have realized what it was and hidden it so that he might have a chance to study it. *Hypnotism Direct*—that had been Reardon. *Hypnotism at Second and Third Removes*—that had been Bill acting on his office, herself on her bridge group, Barbara on her college mates. The *Reverse Electromagnetic Effect*—that had been all those weird happenings over television.

She stared at her bound and gagged son. If it hadn't been for that postcard and if she had gone for the book herself instead of sending James, this wouldn't have happened. As it was the book had turned him into a little monster.

Her own child! And she had thought that he was becoming such *a* fine upstanding young man of late! Had he hypnotized her into thinking that? Probably. Just as he had tried to hypnotize her again before. Let her untie his hands and he'd snap his fingers and in a moment her eyes would glaze ...

She shuddered. She couldn't let him loose. But she couldn't leave him there like that either. You can't keep a child bound and gagged for the rest of his or your natural life. You can't do it for more than a few hours. Sooner or later, even if it were only to permit him to eat, she'd have to untie him and then ...

She stared down at the book in her hands. How *had* it got here? Had some irresponsible person in the year 2083 or so read it, just as James had done, and then gone around hypnotizing people at random? Perhaps he had hypnotized someone who could operate a time machine and the bewildered scientist had sent it backward in time.

She caught herself up short. Such speculations, to a practical woman like Carrie, were silly. The important thing was that here, before her, were a thousand pages of useful but dangerous information—how dangerous she could only guess. So far James had done little actual harm but let his resentment be aroused, let him want really to revenge himself on some one, and he'd be the most dangerous human being alive.

Her eyes ran down the list of chapters again. They seemed endless. *Hypnotism by*

*Gesture—Hypnotism by Mechanical Means—Hypnotism by Autosuggestion—Posthypnotic Suggestion* — and finally a whole series on *Erasure*.

Erasure—that sounded interesting. What were you supposed to erase? There were different subheadings—*Erasure of Susceptibility Erasure of Specific Directives—General Erasure*.

She sat down and read with a concentration she had not shown in years.

Two hours later she thought she knew what to do. First she did what the book said was necessary to protect herself. Then she said, "James, look at me."

James looked and she began to erase. An hour later she decided he was safe and untied him.

Then she sat down and wrote Barbara a letter. She knew that after Barbara had read it through a few times, the first time in bewilderment, the second and third times with a feeling of obedience, she would follow her mother's instructions perfectly and end by burning the letter, just as she had burned the one James sent her.

Of those most directly affected that left only Bill. Reardon? He was all right, she thought. James had victimized him after reading no more than the first chapter or two. He hadn't yet read enough then to be really dangerous. But Bill ...

She had a little talk with her husband directly after supper. It was short, *it* was simple, it was sweet. When she had ended Bill remembered nothing and felt fine. He *was* fine.

There was one more chapter to apply, the one on *Autoerasure*. That required careful planning, carefully thought-out suggestions. When she had completed all she had ordered herself to do she threw the book into the furnace and watched it burn, stirring the fragments to make sure that it was completely consumed.

*All* was forgotten. *All* was fine. Nothing had ever happened.

A few weeks later there came a postcard. "Dear Madam," it read. "The book, *The Perfect Hostess*, by Wilhelmina Hoskins, which is charged to your card, is now two weeks overdue. Please return it at your earliest convenience. There is a charge of one cent for each day overdue."

What on earth were they talking about? Carrie wondered vaguely. She hadn't been to the library in months. "James," she called, "Did you ever get me a library book called *The Perfect Hostess*?"

"Gosh, no, Mom," said James.